

~ Love by Life ~

by Red Hope

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sex/subtext: subtext? of course.

violence: a smidge, yes.

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Starr walked into her apartment and tossed her keys on the small table beside her door. She kicked backwards with her right foot and managed to slam the front door with a loud bang. Her right slumped some from the weight of the laptop and purse; eyes suspiciously scanned the apartment. "Honey, I'm home," she called in a light airy voice.

Suddenly there was a thud from a room down the hallway, which was straight ahead. Then a long, black creature went flying out of the open door and crashed into Starr.

Starr stumbled back when the black dog jumped and put her paws on her chest. She laughed as her back hit the door behind her. "So good to see you too, Honey."

The pitbull was rather happy and started to lick at her mom's face.

Starr giggled a little bit more but was relieved when Honey fell back down on all fours. "You been a good girl?" she teased as she bent forward and petted Honey.

Honey continued to wag her long tail, which shook her body back and forth. Her brown eyes were wide and completely focused on Starr. She then took a few steps back because she knew her mom would get her either water or something to eat.

Starr smiled and straightened up. She shifted more into the living room and looked to her right where her huge blue sofa was sitting. She smiled at it and tossed her laptop onto the sofa; it was Friday and she really didn't care.

Honey followed Starr around the counter and into the small kitchen. She stood beside the fridge and watched Starr get her water bowl and place it on the floor. Honey quickly moved the empty bowl while her mom went to the fridge and pulled out the bottle of cold water. Honey dropped her head when the water was flowing into her bowl.

Starr patted her dog on the side then returned the bottle water to the refrigerator. She also took a second to pull out a jug of Turkey Hill ice tea and go to the counter under the cupboards. She poured a glass of tea then returned the bottle to the fridge as well. "So what you think, Honey?"

Honey had just finished her water and looked up at her mom, a few drops of water falling from her mouth.

Starr leaned back against the counter and stared down at her dog. "Maybe your mommy should go visit her girlfriend, you think?"

Honey huffed and dropped her head.

"God what is it with everybody?" complained Starr. "Nobody likes Heather." She grumbled and walked out of the kitchen into the living room then flopped onto her sofa beside the laptop.

Honey's tail lowered but she quietly followed after her mother. When she came around the corner of the sofa, she lifted her tail and wagged it in hopes it'd lighten Starr's mood.

Starr sighed and smiled down at her pitbull. She reached forward some and scratched the dog's back.

Honey lifted her head and closed her eyes as she enjoyed the attention.

"Let's see what's going on in the world." Starr leaned forward and put her glass of tea on the wood table but on top of a stone coaster. She then grabbed the television remote beside it and flicked on her black TV.

The television roared to life on the Weather Channel but was quickly changed to the local news.

Starr leaned back into her sofa but then saw how Honey was looking at her with pleading eyes. She sighed yet was grinning as she took her laptop off the sofa then patted the sofa.

Honey instantly went around her mom's legs then hopped up onto the sofa. She then rested on her right side and lowered her head into Starr's warm but small lap. She gave a yawn but watched the television with her mom.

Starr watched the continued news while her left hand idly ran up and down Honey's stomach. Yet her focus was only halfway on the news while in the back of her mind, she kept thinking about something else. It wasn't until at the end of the news that she finally decided to confront what had been on her mind most of the day at work.

"Okay Honey, you have to listen to this."

The pitbull lifted her head some when her mom leaned forward to pull out the laptop from the case.

Starr waited for the notebook to boot up and while she waited, she talked to her dog. "You remember that dream I had last night?" She started and peered down at her dog. "Well for some reason, I can't stop thinking about it." She sighed and looked at the screen running the XP logo. "It was like Kelly was right there... I know it had to be her, Honey. She was tall as ever...." She was shaking her head as she was logging into

her account. "Eyes as blue as the sky in my dreams," she whispered.

Honey now lifted her head when her mom put the small Dell notebook into her lap. Honey turned over onto her stomach and was able to rest her chin in the small space between the laptop and Starr's stomach.

"Okay ready?" Starr had just finished uploading some text file and glanced down at Honey. She looked back at the screen and started to read, "I feel you're moving on a different cause. Makin' a way for a distant course. You say you love me and you roll your eyes. Turn to stare at the empty skies." She paused in the middle of the poem and continued to read the next lines, "I thought it was over and I passed all that." But Starr paused and reread the verse, she shook her head and clicked on the second 'I' then deleted it. She replaced the 'I' with a 'we' instead.

Honey whined a little as if in question.

Starr understood what her dog was asking so she reread the poem with the new change. "I feel you're moving on a different cause. Makin' a way for a distant course. You say you love me and you roll your eyes. Turn to stare at the empty skies. I thought it was over and we passed all that."

Honey peered up when her mom stopped reading the poem.

Starr sighed and closed out the text document. "That's all I have so far," she quietly mentioned.

Honey slowly lowered her chin back down onto her mom's lap.

Starr started to shut down the laptop and while it turned off, she looked at her pitbull. "I can't believe its been over three years now," she whispered.

Honey gave a deep sigh of agreement.

"Why am I suddenly having dreams of her now?" Starr shook her head while folding the screen down to lock into place. "What's strange is the fact it didn't seem like a dream, Honey."

Honey lifted her head and curiously looked at Starr.

"It was just too real to be a dream," explained Starr.

The pitbull tilted her head to one side as if she was now confused.

"I don't know," complained the young woman, "It just doesn't make sense." She sighed and looked at her dog. "I don't make sense. What am I saying? It was just a dream."

Honey's floppy ears lowered some and she slowly put her chin back down in Starr's lap.

Starr dropped her head back against the sofa. "I guess I should head over to Heather's

place." She then lifted her head back up and looked down at Honey. "You want to come?"

Honey whined.

Starr grumbled back. "Chicken," she teased.

Honey lifted her head with a happy look and wagged her tail.

"Such a chicken pitbull." Starr ran her left hand up and down Honey's back. "I still love you though."

Honey kept wagging her tail but put her chin back down.

Starr sighed and sat up some but made sure to grab a hold of the notebook. She bent forward and put it away in the case then stood up.

Honey got up onto all fours on the sofa and hopped off. She followed her mom into the bedroom.

Starr quickly gathered up a clean set of jeans, a white blouse from the closet, and a red camisole to wear under the blouse. She then went into the bathroom to take a shower.

Honey though jumped up into her mom's double bed, made a few circles in the middle then flopped down. She slowly closed her eyes and it took her awhile to drift off but right when she was about to fall asleep, the bathroom door opened again. She faintly cracked her eyes open and saw her mom stroll in with her dirty clothes in one arm and the towel in the other. Starr was already dressed in her clean clothes. Honey decided to close her eyes again but the quietness in the room was broken when Starr turned on the radio.

The radio instantly came onto the previous station and woman's voice began to take over the room.

"All we've done is to pass back to frame number one. C'mon now, now. I wanna show you all again what it would be like. Just let go and let me love you."

Starr grumbled and stepped back to her entertainment stand and bent forward again. She put her finger on the tuner changer as she heard the woman sing, "Everyway that I can. I'll try to make you love me again. Everyway-" Her voice was cut out as Starr switched to a new station. "Damn love songs," grumbled Starr. She came to another alternative rock station and kept the radio there.

Honey slowly closed her eyes and listened to the beat of the music despite she couldn't understand one thing the human was howling about but it made her sleepy.

Starr finished getting ready and decided she'd walk and feed Honey before going to Heather's. She didn't expect to stay the night at Heather's, especially with Honey staying home. After Starr stepped into her boots, she walked to the front door and called for Honey.

Honey lifted her head and quickly jumped off to go to her mom.

Starr bent down with Honey's blue harness and put it on the pitbull once she was close enough. She then hooked on the leash and opened the apartment door. She and Honey went into the hallway of the apartment housing and hastened to the front door. The cold November air struck Starr's face and made her shiver from head to toe.

"Should of grabbed my coat," muttered Starr. She wrapped her arms around her body but let her right hand stick out with the leash. Honey dragged her around the apartment building, past the parking area, and into the backyard area. It wasn't long before the cold pair trotted back across the yard and into the apartment building. Starr rushed into her warm apartment and felt the chill dissolve from her once inside her toasty apartment. She then took off Honey's leash and harness.

Honey perked up when she saw her mom head into the kitchen and she heard the distinct sound of the food bag. She hurried into the kitchen and watched Starr take a big cup full of dog food.

Starr glanced over and saw Honey wagging her tail at her. She grinned and asked, "Egg?"

For a response, the pitbull tapped her paws and nails on the tiled floor.

Starr laughed and straightened up. She walked over to the fridge behind Honey and opened it. She grabbed an egg from inside and returned to the bowl of dog food on the counter. She cracked the egg open and let runny egg fall into the bowl on top of the brown food. Starr disposed of the egg shell in the trash can under the sink counter. She then returned to the bowl with a fork and started to mix up the food with the egg. After she was finished, she put it down on the floor to the left of the fridge where Honey's water bowl rested.

Honey didn't hesitate for a second and dove into the food.

"Taste it, Honey... geez." Starr chuckled as she walked out of the kitchen and went back to her bedroom. She quickly turned off the radio and decided to wear her black peacoat so she grabbed it from her closet then hurried to the front door. "I'll see you later, Honey."

Honey took a few steps to the edge of the kitchen and poked her head around the edge of the kitchen counter.

Starr grabbed her purse and keys from the table beside the door. She then tugged on her peacoat while turning around. She smiled at Honey as she buttoned up her peacoat. After she was finished, she bent down and held out her hands.

The pitbull dropped her head some and came over to her mom.

"You'll be okay, sweetie?" Starr ran her hands up and down Honey's back.

Honey lifted her head and gave her mom a few lick-kisses on the cheek. She wagged

her tail just a little bit though.

"I'll be back later this evening, promise," whispered the small blond.

Honey peered into soft green eyes and started to wag her tail more at the reassurance she saw from Starr.

Starr chuckled and leaned forward and planted a firm kiss to Honey's head. She then stood up to her short height and smiled. "I'll see you, Honey." She turned and opened the door.

Honey tilted her head and watched her mom leave the apartment but made sure to lock the door. When she couldn't hear Starr's foot steps anymore, she dropped her ears then her head. She slowly turned around and went to her mom's bedroom.

Starr unlocked her black VW Jetta and jumped into it. She immediately started the engine and backed out of the small parking lot onto the quiet road. She tried to get the heater to warm up faster but with a cool engine it would take a little while. She then realized it was starting to get dark out so she quickly turned on her headlights plus the fog lights. If it was one thing that Starr tried extra hard to avoid it was a car accident.

As her drive continued out of the small town and down the quiet road, she decided she needed some music. Starr turned on her radio and flipped around on her preset channels. She came to a stop on a woman's sweet voice and she carefully listened to it.

"Everyway that I can. I'll give you all my love and then. Everyway that I can. I'll cry ; I'll die and make you mine again."

Starr's eyes widened when recognized the song again. "How the hell does this song do that?" She reached forward, about to change to another preset channel but she hesitated.

"Hold me closer oh so good. You make me feel just like I should. I know whatcha thinkin' uh-hu good. Now, the rest of the world is overruled."

Starr briefly closed her eyes from the lyrics that filled her. She quickly opened her eyes again and came overwhelmed with the view of the dark forest ahead that she'd driven through thousands of times. She hated this part of the ride.

"Tell me whatcha see in other girls all around. Come on closer and tell me whatcha don't find here.

Come on now, now," sang the woman.

"That's it," growled Starr. She hit another preset channel and switched to a song by 3 Doors Down. She took a shaky breath and realized she needed her high beams on so she flipped the switch. She tried to relax in her seat as the heater finally warmed up the car for her.

Like any other trip to Heather's, it required her to drive this road that Starr continually tried to avoid but it was the quickest and easiest way to Heather's house. Starr's least

favourite part of the road was here through the thick, dense woods. And like a constant ritual, Starr would slow down at one particular spot on the road and that spot was approaching her now.

Starr swallowed and slowed her car from 50 miles per hour down to about 30. For some reason, her heart started to pound harder and harder but this wasn't the first time she'd done this. So why was this any different than the other times?

Glancing in her rear view mirror, Starr saw nobody approaching from behind and far ahead she saw no headlights. It kind of struck a cord of fear in her but yet she continued to slow down. Her Jetta came down to 10 miles per hour and started to pull off onto the shoulder of the road.

"What am I doing?" hotly muttered Starr to herself. Starr pulled off onto the shoulder of the road and pushed hard on her brake. She felt her car stop and her dark green eyes just remained fixed on the white cross nailed on the oak tree just ahead of her.

Starr closed her eyes and tried to control her emotions, there were so many of them. They were still fresh and raw since the day they were spawned in her heart.

"Why can't I just let you go?" rasped Starr, her head falling forward into her hands. Slowly hot tears rolled down her cheeks, she had yet to let out all her tears in her soul. She lifted her head and with her right hand, she put her car's gears into park. She furiously wiped away her tears on her cheeks. Starr then felt some kind of chill in the car despite the heater's efforts to keep things warm.

"I wanna give you everything you've been missin' out," whispered a deep voice.

Starr held her breath and looked around in her car. Her body was tense, on fire, and shaking but she had to be hearing things.

"Just let go and let me love you," uttered the echoing voice again.

"Oh... my god," gasped Starr. She hastily unbuckled her seatbelt with shaky hands. She threw open her car door and stumbled out of the car. "Oh my god, oh my god."

Starr took a step away from her car and spun around in a circle, she saw nobody and no cars.

"Everyway that I can," sang a deep voice from all around Starr.

"Who is that?" hotly asked Starr. She held up her hands and started to walk to the front of her car. "Where are you?"

"I'll try to make you love me again," whispered a singsong voice.

"This is not funny!" yelled Starr. She put her hands on the hood of her car. "Who the hell are you?" she hotly yelled.

"Everyway that I can. I'll give you all my love and then," whispered a voice but a little louder this time.

"Where are you?" hotly called out Starr again.

"Everyway that I can," whispered the voice along the cold breezes.

Starr spun around when she thought she heard the voice behind her. Her eyes came to rest on the white cross on the oak tree.

"I'll cry; I'll die... and make you mine again," sung out the voice then suddenly the breezes gusted into strong winds.

"Kelly," whimpered Starr, her eyes filling with tears again. Her face shifted into pain and anger. "Let me go!" she hotly yelled at the cross.

"I'm in love with you," whispered the deep voice across the winds.

"Leave me alone!" yelled Starr again at the cross then her eyes wondered around at the surrounding forest. "You left me when I needed you the most! Why can't you be here now?"

"I'll do all you want me to," called out the deep voice; it was growing more distinct and closer.

"Just let me go so I can let you go!" screamed Starr at the top of her lungs. Her hot tears began to grow in numbers.

"Make me...." called a deep voice from across the road.

Starr quickly looked across and saw nothing but brown leaves and branches flying in the wind.

"Make me...." sung the deep voice just to the left of Starr in the black woods.

Starr jumped and held up her hands. Her heart was pounding faster and faster and her tears seemed to burn more against her skin. "Kelly, you're dead... you are dead!" she yelled in the direction of the voice.

"Nothing in the world, that could stop me, no," called a voice from down the road.

Starr spun around and squinted when she spotted a very dark figure that her headlights just filtered out from the darkness.

"Everyway that I can, I'll try to make you love me again," sung out the voice.

Starr held her breath when the dark form started to glide towards her. The singsong deep voice continued to float around her as the figure slowly approached her.

"Everyway that I can, I'll give you all my love and then. Everyway that I can..." whispered the voice across the dying winds.

Starr stepped back until the back of her legs hit the front of her car. She began to

shake all over and her stomach started to turn. Her heart could barely keep up with the racing adrenaline rush in her system. Starr sucked in a deep breath when the figure came to a stop about ten feet in front of her. She couldn't make out anything other than a black cloak or something was completely around them to hide everything of them. The person, the thing was just a black human shaped form before Starr.

"I'll cry; I'll die... and make you mine again," whispered the figure.

"No, no no no," rasped Starr; she was furiously shaking her head. "This is not happening... this can't be happening."

"Starr," urged the figure.

Starr quickly moved and stumbled around the front of her car, back to her driver's door. "Stay back," she yelled.

The figure shifted a little closer but stopped and whispered, "Starr... please."

Starr closed her eyes when the voice perfectly shifted into Kelly's voice. So many times in the past she'd heard Kelly plead for help just like that; it was a plead she could never reject. "Kelly?" She lifted her head as fresh tears started to form.

"Yes," echoed Kelly's deep voice.

"Oh god," rasped Starr as she turned back to the figure. "This is a dream...?"

The figure's head started to shake. "No, Starr... I am here and I have been in your dreams."

"Why, why?" uttered Starr; her voice between fear and upset.

"I need your help, it's the only way for me to be free."

"Free... free of what?" Starr was so confused about everything and her heart continued to pound.

The figure took a step closer but stopped and stepped back. "From Hell."

"Kelly," called out angry voices in the woods.

Starr tensed up and looked around but didn't see anybody.

The figure too was looking around but quickly looked back at Starr. "Starr, you can only save me."

Starr furrowed her eyebrows and her head turned back to the figure. "What? How? Kelly, what is going on?"

"Kelly," yelled out the angry voices again; they were growing closer.

The figure took a step back. "You must forgive, Starr."

"Forgive what?"

"Look inside yourself, Starr... why are you so angry about the death?"

"Because you left me," almost yelled Starr. "I need you... so badly," she rasped. She then heard the angry voices yell out Kelly's name again. She looked around hastily but then saw the figure step back yet again. "Kelly?"

"Show me forgiveness, Starr... I have paid my debt in Hell," explained the figure.

Starr closed her eyes and her tears returned to her. "I need you, Kelly... and you left me."

"I am sorry," whispered the figure.

Starr suddenly broke into more tears but she started to smile some but more sadly than anything.

"If you give me another chance," whispered the figure, "I will never stop showing you how sorry I am. I will return to you, I need to be with you."

Starr closed her eyes and whispered, "You are my soul, Kelly." Slowly her eyes opened again but her body shivered with fear when the angry voices howled Kelly's name. Suddenly the wind gusted up again. "Kelly?" she screamed.

The figure glided backwards again. "Get into your car, Starr. You have to make it through the woods."

"Kelly!" screamed out the angry voices, they were coming closer, and tree branches all around started to snap.

"When you come to the edge of the woods, you will see me in the road," yelled the figure over the winds, "Do not stop! Whatever you do, do not stop and come to me... don't be afraid."

"Kelly!" yelled several voices from across the road. "Kelly!"

The figure's head turned and then the figure quickly glided away into the darkness. "Go!" yelled the figure to Starr. "Do not stop until you're out of the woods! Do not stop!"

Starr held her breath when the figure suddenly disappeared and she quickly scrambled to get back into her car. She buckled herself in and soon as she lifted her eyes, a darker figure than Kelly was in front of her car. He held a reaper in his right hand but then he suddenly disappeared. "Oh god!" screamed Starr.

She quickly put her car into drive and turned back onto the road again.

The Jetta sped down the road, kicking up leaves behind, and trying to push against the strong winds.

Starr was still shaking and barely able to keep control of her car but somehow she managed. She then suddenly slammed on her gas pedal and went up to 70 miles per hour. She had to make it to the end of the woods, to the end. She knew the end of the woods was just ahead, it was close, so close.

Within thirty seconds, Starr could make out the end of the woods about a mile or so ahead. As she neared it, she spotted a person in the middle of the road.

"Kelly?" she whispered. "Oh my god, is that Kelly?" Her green eyes narrowed as she came closer. "I have to get her, I have to get her," she rasped and started to panic.

"Do not stop," echoed Kelly's voice in the car, "Do not stop until you're out of the woods."

Starr suddenly realized even if she started to break now it would be too late. She would slam directly into Kelly and if she tried to avoid Kelly, she would crash her car. Suddenly though something in her made her speed up even faster, some type of reassurance. Kelly started to come into clear view, closer and closer.

"Oh shit," yelled Starr as she closed in on Kelly. "Kelly!" she screamed and her right hand released the steering wheel and started to shoot out to the passenger seat.

Everything flashed before Starr's eyes in pieces.

Kelly was holding out her arms, she was completely nude, her midnight hair twisted and messy. Kelly's skin was a mix of white and blue with bruises, her face had a huge gash on the right cheek and in the left cheek were reflections of window glass. Starr started to silently scream when she saw the thick tree branch sticking out of Kelly's chest.

Suddenly Starr's Jetta came into Kelly and Starr's scream went unsilent as her right hand finally made it to the passenger's side.

Kelly glided through the car's hood like a ghost but she quickly stopped when a warm hand captured her unbeating heart. She opened her mouth to scream but nothing came out but all she felt was intense warmth.

Starr's cry ended when her breath ran out. She gasped for air as her hand remained resting on a cool chest, she could feel a rapidly beating heart underneath it. She quickly recalled her driving and refocused on that; she was just out of the forest. Then Kelly's scream broke open in the car and it caused Starr to pull off to the shoulder of the road.

"Kelly, Kelly?" rasped Starr. She threw her car into park and unbuckled her seatbelt.

Kelly stopped screaming and dropped her head back against the headrest. Her rich blue eyes closed and she slumped in the seat.

"Kelly?" almost yelled Starr. She then realized her right hand was still on Kelly's chest and she could feel the firm heartbeat underneath. She felt the endless reassurance that

brought her. She leaned over and brought her other hand up to Kelly's cheek; it was so chilled. She then started to look over Kelly's body.

Kelly was still nude but her skin was more alive yet still pale. No longer was there a gash across Kelly's cheek, not even a scar while none of the glass shards remained in the other cheek. Starr's eyes then drifted down to her right hand that was resting on Kelly's chest. The branch that had ultimately killed Kelly was now gone, it no longer pierced Kelly's heart like a stake.

Starr's worried eyes lifted back up to Kelly's face and she was greeted by partially opened blue eyes. "Kelly?"

Kelly's lips pulled with a crooked smile. "Hi."

Starr's left hand pulled away from Kelly's cheek. Starr began to cry and her hand covered her mouth to hide the muffled whimpers. "Oh my god," she muffled through her hand.

Kelly's lips curled into a soft smile and she reached up with her left hand.

Starr couldn't believe it as Kelly's large, warm hand gently took her hand and pulled her hand away from her face. She couldn't take her eyes off of Kelly. Her hand was soon laced tightly with Kelly's. "How....?"

Kelly opened her mouth to reply yet nothing came out. There was no explanation she could truly give right now, not here. "Can we go home?" she finally whispered.

Starr just faintly nodded then slowly it was as if her mind decided to catch up. It was like something snapped her back to reality and she quickly asked, "Are you cold? Let me get a blanket... I happen to have one." Before Kelly could say anything, Starr rushed out of the car and went to the trunk.

Kelly dropped her head back against the headrest and tried to relax. She was so incredibly drained but yet despite it all, she was happy. Her same soft smile reappeared on her lips. Suddenly though she was caught off guard by the cold winter air rushing into her when Starr opened her door.

"Here," offered Starr. She unfolded the blanket in midair and let it cascade over Kelly.

Kelly shivered for a moment from the cold blanket but it only took a few seconds for it to warm up. "Thank you," she quietly said.

Starr smiled and only nodded. She wasn't sure what else to say; her mind too busy trying to process tonight's events. She returned back into the car on the driver's side and buckled back. "We're going... around that woods," she muttered and huffed.

Kelly faintly chuckled and just dropped her head back once again. She closed her eyes and tried to regain her senses with her body.

Starr remained quiet as she continued to drive down the road. Up ahead she would take a left turn and swing down a small back road that would wrap around the woods.

She had no intentions of going near the woods if she could help it. As Starr drove home, she tried to relax and regain control of herself; she had such a mix of emotions coursing through her mind and body. She hadn't really realized it until much later that sometime during the drive she'd take Kelly's hand into her own.

When the Jetta pulled into the side parking lot, the two women turned their heads and just silently stared at each other.

"I-"

"Can you-"

Both women had spoken at the same time and stopped at the same time. They laughed with each other and then smiles pulled at their lips.

"Let's get you inside," quietly stated Starr.

"That would be... wonderful."

Starr nodded and hopped out of the car. She walked around as Kelly got out of the car. She came up to Kelly and made sure the blanket was snug around Kelly's body. "Come on." She hurried Kelly to the front of the apartment complex and she was actually relieved it was night time so nobody could see Kelly like this. She pushed open the main door and led her friend to the apartment.

Kelly ducked inside and was instantly greeted by a black pitbull and the old scent of her apartment returned to her. "You haven't moved?" she quietly questioned.

Starr had just closed the door and stepped around Kelly. "No," she replied. "Hi, Honey."

Kelly smiled down at the happy pitbull and as much as she wanted to touch the dog, she knew her hands were tied with the blanket.

"Do... do you want a shower or just get some clothes on... sleep or eat?" Starr's voice faintly shook because she wasn't sure how to handle having Kelly back.

"I think a shower." Kelly faintly shivered but she tilted her head to one side. "Clothes?"

Slowly Starr nodded her head. "I still have your... stuff."

Kelly felt her heart drop as she realized just how much she'd meant to Starr. She knew Starr hadn't let go of her but she never knew how much. Not until she saw Starr still lived in their same apartment, still kept her belongings as if she was just wanting for Kelly to return one day. "Thank you," she finally said.

Starr reached out and grasped Kelly's blanket covered arm. "This way." She silently led Kelly into the bedroom. And right behind them was Honey, who was rather curious about why Kelly had finally come home.

Starr guided Kelly into the bathroom and flicked on the lights. She then turned to Kelly and sadly smiled at her. "Are you hungry?"

"Famished."

"Shower and I'll cook something for us," replied Starr. Her gentle smile appeared but her green eyes were frosted with some kind of doubt or disbelief.

Kelly let it go because she knew Starr needed some time to grasp everything. She needed some time herself to take in the fact she was now breathing again.

"I'll leave some clothes out for you," called Starr from the bedroom.

Kelly called back her thank you then she closed the bathroom door. Within a minute, she was hopping into the warm shower and started vigorously clean her body. It took her all of twenty minutes to take her shower, when she got out she dried off then looked to the mirror. She couldn't see anything so she took her towel and wiped the steam off the mirror. As her towel wiped the moisture away, she was greeted by her reflection and stunning blue eyes.

Kelly leaned in closer to the mirror and, with her right hand, she at first gently touch her cheek. She didn't feel any pain and as she pushed harder, her hand didn't sense any glass. As her hand fell back to her side, she lowered her head until her chin almost touched her upper chest. Her eyes scanned over her chest where the stake had been embedded for so long. Her right hand once again lifted and gently grazed over the soft skin just near the top of her breast.

She shook away all her doubts and fears after being convinced her body was fine again. She hung her towel up on the back of the bathroom door then walked out into the bedroom. Her eyes instantly focussed on the pair of jeans, white blouse, underwear and bra resting on the foot of the double bed. She chuckled some and her eyes lowered to the floor where her old Addidas sneakers rested with a pair of socks tucked into one shoe. "It's good to be home," she muttered only to herself.

After Kelly was dressed, she made her way into the hallway and her stomach growled when her nose picked up the scent of chicken. In some strange way, a part of her felt as if she'd never been gone and her death was some bad nightmare. When Kelly stepped into the living room, she looked into the kitchen and saw Starr busying herself with the dinner.

Honey hopped off the sofa and came over to Kelly.

"Hi," whispered Kelly. She knelt down and happily petted Honey with both her hands.

Honey was so excited to see Kelly again; she'd missed Kelly as much as Starr did. She lifted her head and give Kelly a few licks on the cheek.

Kelly laughed and never felt so good to receive one of Honey's kisses. "I missed you too."

Honey wagged her tail even harder, which made her butt sway back and forth.

Kelly didn't move and continued to give the pitbull more attention. However she thought she heard a small sniffing sound so she lifted her head and looked at Starr.

Starr had her back to Kelly as she stirred the pot of rice. She tried to control her emotions but it was incredibly hard.

Kelly now knew Starr was crying or at least trying to hold her tears back. Kelly patted Honey on the rump then she stood up and approached Starr from behind.

Starr stiffened up for a brief second when warm arms encircled her waist. She relaxed when Kelly's body pressed into her back.

"Are you okay?" uttered Kelly in a worried voice.

Starr's straight shoulders now suddenly slumped and she let go of the wood spoon into the rice. She turned around and wrapped her arms around Kelly.

Kelly sadly sighed as she pulled Starr in closer and she lowered her head down to Starr's. "Sssh... it's okay," she whispered.

Starr only began to cry harder and her hug went fierce.

Kelly bit her lower lip but she remained strong for her friend. She swayed their bodies back and forth some in a very soothing motion.

"I keep thinking," uttered Starr, "that I'm still asleep... in last night's dream."

"You're not," promised Kelly, "you're not. I'm here." She pulled back a bit and reached up with her right hand to wipe away Starr's tears. "I'm here... forever."

Starr had taken the reassurance and when she finally was able to separate from Kelly, she continued with the dinner. Kelly, however, made sure to stay close to Starr so she could keep an eye on her. In either regard, she liked staying close to Starr and she needed more than ever.

After Starr finished making the dinner, she put it together and she took one plate to the dinner table and Kelly took hers. The pair sat down and quietly ate, neither of them sure what to say. Honey had come to the table too but decided to just lie on the floor between their feet instead of begging. She could tell tonight wasn't a good night to be begging, maybe tomorrow night though.

Once dinner was over, the pair discarded their dirty dishes into the sink and decided to both wash it tomorrow. Kelly took Starr's hand and led her to the bedroom. Starr found herself pulled into the bed with Kelly's help and she didn't refuse it. Right now she needed to feel Kelly all around her and when Kelly pulled her into her arms and body; she felt all her fears suddenly flood out of her.

For the rest of the evening, Kelly and Starr remained in each other's arms. They would cry together then whisper words of new promises then begin to cry yet again. It wasn't until after midnight did the pair finally wear themselves out from all the draining

emotions. They'd fallen back into the bed, under the covers, and wrapped in each other's arms and legs.

Starr took a shaky breath but she made herself do this, she could do this. Her Jetta began to slow down and she directed her car off to the shoulder.

Kelly stole a quick glance at Starr. She stretched her left hand out and captured Kelly's hand and took it off the steering wheel.

Starr drew on the strength from Kelly's touch. She laced their hands together as she swallowed down her fears. She was going to put this to rest finally. Her car finally came to a stop on the shoulder and she gazed about the woods in the midday sunlight.

"It'll be okay," reassured Kelly.

Starr bit her lower lip some but she nodded.

"Come on." Kelly gave a warm smile and she pushed open her door.

Starr broke the hand contact and got out of the car. She noted how the woods looked so different in the daylight than at night time. When she came around to the front of the car, she reached out for Kelly.

Kelly grasped Starr's hand with hers again while in her right hand lightly swung a hammer.

Gradually, the pair approached the oak tree, hand in hand, and strength between them. They could do this together.

Starr tugged her peacoat closer to her body. She came to a stop in front of the oak tree and she stared at the white cross.

Kelly took a deep breath and looked at Starr. "Ready?"

"Yes," whispered Starr, "Its time to move on from this."

Kelly faintly nodded and she released Starr's hand. She lifted the hammer in her other hand and she spun it around so that she could remove the nail in the centre of the cross.

Starr stepped up beside her friend and raised her hands up when Kelly yanked out the nail. She carefully grasped the two horizontal sides of the cross and carefully dislodged the cross from the tree. As she lowered the cross, the pair stared at faint impression of the cross left on the tree.

Kelly finally tore her gaze away from the tree and looked down at her friend.

Starr's eyes floated to Kelly and for the first time she had a smile of promise.

Kelly returned the smile and stepped closer to Starr.

Starr closed in the distance and quickly wrapped her arms around the taller woman.

Kelly returned the embrace and held tightly to her girlfriend.

"Don't you dare ever leave me again," ordered Starr in a gentle voice.

"Promise," replied Kelly.

Starr happily sighed and lowered her head against her girlfriend's chest. "I love you," she whispered.

Kelly's smile grew warmer and she whispered, "I love you too, Starr."

The End